

Citation for published version:

Sanchez, HS & Dunworth, K 2015, 'Issues and Agency: Postgraduate student and tutor experiences with written feedback', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 456-470.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2014.921885>

DOI:

[10.1080/02602938.2014.921885](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2014.921885)

Publication date:

2015

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* on 27 May 2014, available online:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02602938.2014.921885>

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Issues and agency: Postgraduate student and tutor experiences with written feedback

Hugo Santiago Sanchez *

Katie Dunworth *

** Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom*

Abstract

This paper examines the issues which postgraduate students and tutors experienced as they engaged in receiving, providing, and requesting feedback as well as the strategies which they adopted as they sought resolution of these issues. The study described here used a case study approach, using data obtained from semi-structured and stimulated recall interviews from students and staff from three discipline areas at one university in the UK. The findings reinforce the conclusions that have been drawn in a number of previous studies in terms of the sources of dissatisfaction emerging from individual interactions and institutional practices. Additionally, however, the results expand on our current understanding of feedback and agency in higher education by illustrating how participants sought out imaginative solutions to the challenges they experienced in order to enhance the effectiveness of the feedback process. The diversity of the strategies used provides evidence of student and tutor agency, and have implications for current feedback practices and future research in this area.

Keywords: feedback; perceived issues; coping strategies; agency

Introduction

Student evaluations of their academic experience in higher education consistently reveal, across disciplines, institutions and countries, that feedback is a prominent source of dissatisfaction for students (Molloy and Boud 2013; Nicol 2010). Staff, too, according to studies, appear to find feedback problematic (e.g. Price et al. 2010). The reasons given for such mutual discontent are varied, and include, inter alia, issues of timeliness, clarity of information, and the extent of the uptake of advice (Johnsson 2012; Jones and Gorra 2013; Merry et al. 2013).

In addition, while it is widely believed that feedback has a key role to play in students' development (Brown and Knight 1994; Merry et al. 2013), there is mounting evidence that it is not necessarily effective (e.g. Bailey and Garner 2010; Wingate 2010) and may, in some instances, be counter-productive (Molloy and Boud 2012; Robinson, Pope, and Holyoak 2013). The reported failure of feedback to attain one of

its key goals – the facilitation of learning – has led to a broad acknowledgement that a different approach is required, one which recognises that feedback, like learning more generally, is not a simple matter of information transmission but is constructed and, thus, needs to involve both students and staff if it is to be meaningful and useful (Burke and Pieterick 2010; Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2014).

While recognising that these challenges exist, the study reported in this paper adopted a foundational premise that both students and staff are conceptually positively oriented to feedback as an instrument for learning, and that it is therefore important not only to explore the factors that are perceived to reduce its value but also to identify how those involved accommodate, address or use disjunction as a springboard for development. The study was, therefore, guided by two main research questions:

- What issues, if any, do students and tutors perceive they experience as they engage in the process of feedback?
- What strategies do students and tutors use to address any issues that exist?

Such an exploration of how participants in the study reacted to any challenges that they encountered could, it was believed, potentially shed light on ways by which students and tutors could move towards a greater level of mutual understanding when requesting, providing, interpreting, or responding to feedback.

Review of the literature

Over a period of more than a decade there has been a shift in the conceptualisation of feedback, at least as far as the scholarly literature is concerned, from a cognitivist approach that presents knowledge as a product and feedback as transmission of information, to a social constructivist perspective that views feedback as a dialogic process (Askew and Lodge 2000; Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2013; Price et al. 2012). A corollary of this shift is a greater focus on the role and agency of the student in the feedback process and considerations of other modes of feedback than that between tutor and student. For example, both peer feedback and self-feedback have been investigated and found to have positive benefits (e.g. Boud and Falchikov 2006; Bryan and Clegg 2006; Liu and Carless 2006).

Tutor-student feedback, nevertheless, remains of key importance in higher education, not least, perhaps, because of the close link between assessment and feedback (Price et al. 2012; Robinson, Pope, and Holyoak 2013). One key aim of tutor-student feedback, for instance, is helping to ‘close the gap between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood’ (Robinson, Pope, and Holyoak 2013, 260). However, it can serve other major functions, such as helping students to

clarify what their goals are (Nicol 2010), playing a scaffolding role for students as they integrate into a new academic culture (Tian and Lowe 2012), and facilitating learner autonomy or self-monitoring (Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2013).

One strand of the literature on tutor-student feedback has focused on what has been described as the 'object' of feedback (Price et al. 2012, 42): technical areas where improvements can be made on the part of the tutor following student comments about their experiences. Recommendations have been made, for example, with regard to timeliness, accessibility, legibility, and constructiveness (Bols and Wicklow 2012; Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Rae and Cochrane 2008). These are issues that also emerge from student surveys (Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin 2013). It has been noted, however, that such surveys may reinforce a view of feedback as information transmission (Pokorny and Pickford 2010), an approach which, given the multiple voices of discontent, can be judged to have manifestly failed to achieve its objectives.

On the other hand, as indicated earlier in this paper, the greater part of the scholarly literature, drawing on theoretical perspectives of learning as situated and socially constructed (Nicol 2010; Orsmond, Merry, and Handley 2012), has decisively moved towards a view of feedback as dialogic. There are clear implications for practice associated with this position. These include recognising that students must be active participants in the feedback process (Molloy and Boud 2013), engaging in feedback as a process rather than a product (Boud and Molloy 2013; Price et al. 2013; Tian and Lowe 2013), and acknowledging that learning from feedback takes place over an extended time period (Price et al. 2013).

In this regard it appears that theory has outpaced current reported practice, an example of what has been described as 'the great disconnect' (Dumont, Istance, and Benavides 2010) between educational research and practice today. There are studies which indicate that complex and sophisticated understandings of the nature and purpose of feedback do exist (e.g. Pokorny and Pickford 2010; Tian and Lowe 2012), but it seems to be clear from the conclusions reached in many research studies that both staff and students would benefit from explicit learning about feedback as a concept in order to provide effective feedback and to interpret and respond to it (Johnsson 2012; Price et al. 2010; Rae and Cochrane 2008; Robinson, Pope, and Holyoak 2013; Tian and Lowe 2012).

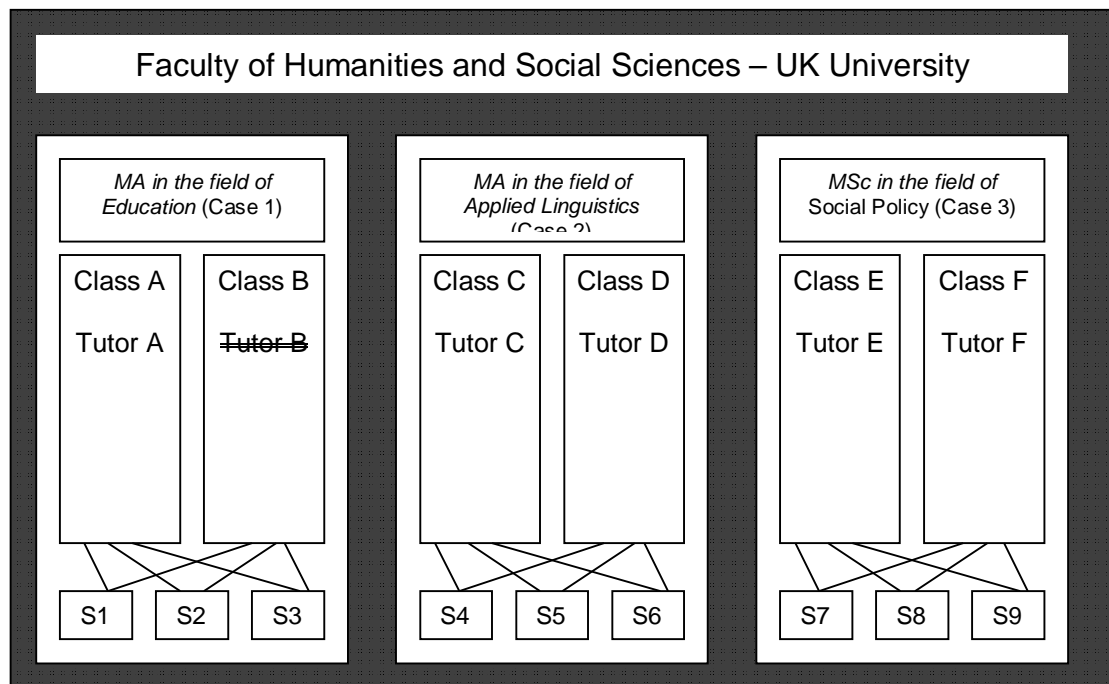
Perhaps the most important consideration in the concept of feedback as a dialogic process is agency, a notion which incorporates the development of a 'sense of oneself' in constructing meaning (Orsmond et al. 2013), the capacity to make and act on choices (Lindgren and McDaniel 2011), and active engagement with the

process of resolving issues experienced in moving towards understanding (Martin 2010). Peer feedback and self-feedback, as experiential processes, embody this concept of agency. Indeed, Sadler (2010) goes further, questioning the value of teacher feedback per se, arguing that 'telling' as the primary means of promoting learning inhibits students' capacity to internalise quality and identify criteria that are 'salient to particular appraisals' (2010: 548). It is this notion of agency which helped guide the study described in this paper, as it sought to uncover the strategies that participants used as they sought resolution of the issues they experienced within the feedback process.

Study design and participants

The results reported in this paper are part of a wider set of findings from a study that took place within a faculty of humanities and social sciences at a university in the UK. The project was exploratory-interpretive in nature (Grotjahn 1987) and followed a within-site (Creswell 2007), embedded, multiple-case design (Yin 2009), involving three case studies relating to master level courses across three different disciplines (Education, Applied Linguistics, and Social Policy). There were eight students enrolled in the Education course, seven in the Social Policy course and 45 in the Applied Linguistics course, most of whom were international. The tutors were all permanent members of staff. To promote data triangulation, each case included a group of three students from one of the three master's courses, and two tutors from different classes within each course (see Figure 1), selected through convenience sampling. During the course of the study, one tutor withdrew; the analysis, therefore, included data from a total of 14 participants (five tutors and nine students). While the case study approach was adopted for the study as a whole because discipline specificity was of interest, the results described in this paper relate to the findings from a cross-case analysis which identified themes across the discipline areas.

Figure 1: Methodological design



Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through individual interviews, conducted with each participant no later than four weeks after the beginning of the students' first semester and again at the end of that semester. The first was a semi-structured background interview which sought to establish a profile of the participants: their educational background, their professional experience and their expectations for tutor feedback. Each interview, which was recorded and later transcribed for analysis, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

At the end of the semester, participants took part in a stimulated recall interview, an introspective methodology designed to explore the thought processes of the interviewee when they undertook a particular action. Tutors and students provided examples of written feedback that they had distributed or received respectively, which were used as support for the recall. Stimulated recall is widely used in educational research (Lyle, 2003), although it does have some acknowledged weaknesses such as the degree of accuracy of memory-based observations and the possibility of post-hoc rationalisation of actions (Borg, 2006). To minimise the impact of these weaknesses, interviews were held within two weeks of the distribution of the final tutor feedback, and interview questions were recycled in a different form over the course of an interview to check the consistency of responses. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was also recorded and transcribed.

All interviewees were provided with information about the study in advance, and were required to acknowledge in writing their informed consent to participate. In order to maintain confidentiality, all participants were allocated pseudonyms, which have been used in this paper.

The data collected were analysed inductively using content analysis procedures. The data were first codified (codification), and then themes were identified (thematic analysis) and grouped into categories (categorisation). Data collection and analysis were cyclical in that the data analysis from the first stage informed the data collection for the second, after which a summative analysis was undertaken (Borg 2011). Data analysis was conducted first in relation to each participant and within each case (within-case analysis) and then across the three cases (cross-case analysis). It is the results from this second stage that are included in this paper, which are presented below separately for students and tutors. In the sections that follow, the data sources are described using the convention of participant name and (BI) for background interviews or (SRI) for stimulated recall interviews.

Findings

The background interviews had identified the formal expectations for tutor feedback that pertained at the institution. In two of the courses, students were expected to submit an early draft of each assessed task, on which tutors were expected to provide formative feedback that would help guide students towards production of their final assignment. In the third course, students were able to seek input from their tutors through tutorials or email communication. Tutors then provided written feedback on the final submitted assignment, which was intended to include a rationale for the grade and assist students to reflect on their practices for future assignments. For two of the courses, the feedback was usually provided some time in advance of the grades, which for moderation and administrative reasons might be issued some weeks after the written feedback.

The themes that were identified from the data could be broadly divided into two main categories: 'individual' and 'contextual'. The first included issues that related to student-tutor interactions (such as difficulty understanding an individual's language, or perceptions of a tutor's educational standards), while the second included factors that were external to the individuals concerned (such as the amount of time allocated to marking or the system of providing feedback without grades). These themes are presented in detail below, first from the perspective of students and then from that of the staff.

Students

One issue that was widely expressed concerned the tutor's use of language, which participants reported as causing understanding difficulties, for example, because of the register and use of specialist terminology, as Vivian explained:

This assignment I had to read the feedback several times to understand what the tutor was saying ... I think it was the wording that I wasn't familiar with ... her language is like very academic ... it's hard to read ... her feedback was also in very specific terms so I had to translate them into my own language (Vivian, SRI).

Sometimes misunderstanding was reported as occurring when the tutor and the student, because of differences in background subject areas, had differing interpretations of metalanguage. Julie, for instance, experienced difficulties communicating with one of her tutors, who was not a specialist in the field she wanted to investigate:

I felt different when I tried to understand her and to make her understand what my idea was about compared to when I am talking to the other tutors who are actually specialized in TESOL ... because she's not really specialized in English teaching area, I tried to use very simple terms and I tried to use a lot of examples ... I tried to communicate a lot, that was the main thing that I tried, so whenever I had a question I tried to email her ... until I clearly understood and until she clearly understood my question (Julie, SRI).

To address the issues that she experienced with the language of the feedback she received, Vivian stated that she read through the feedback multiple times and then rewrote it for herself in a simplified form. Julie, who had found that her questions were not understood by her tutor because of their domain-specific lexis, took the step of simplifying her language, providing illustrative examples and engaging in a process of email dialogue until mutually satisfactory understanding was achieved.

A second issue that students identified was that they could not understand the purpose of tutors' pedagogical techniques or procedures. Rose, for example, noted that her formative feedback contained no positive comments in the documents' margins and that entire sections had no comments at all. She was unsure what this meant and guessed that 'if he [the tutor] didn't leave a comment, it [the section] was fine' (SRI). She argued that positive comments in the margins 'might have provided more guidance when I [she] was revising' (SRI). Likewise, Julie found her tutor's

feedback techniques confusing, and was unsure whether question forms were suggestions or directives for action:

The problem I had with Claire's comments was that she was actually putting a lot of questions in the feedback so, for example, when I described the research question and she put empty ends like 'for teaching?' and 'for whom?', I wasn't really sure whether she was suggesting or do I have to really fix them (Julie, SRI).

The tutor's technique, therefore, failed to serve a clear pedagogical purpose.

A third reported issue related to the content of tutor feedback. This was the case, for example, when feedback content did not meet the students' expectations or needs in terms of focus and guidance:

Most of the feedback he provided was for the draft specifically and how to change the draft but I guess what I was looking for is how to take this draft further to actually make it the bigger work. I only found that in a couple of points but most of the time Daniel only corrected small stuff (Vivian, SRI).

The student experienced uneasiness as she received feedback that focused on what she perceived as insignificant details rather than on substantial areas for improvement. She then criticised the lack of specific guidelines:

Overall I felt very much in the blind working on the paper, thinking 'am I in the right direction?'. I corrected the things he mentioned but I'm still not sure if this is going to be worth good grade ... that was really stressful when you are writing such a long paper (Vivian, SRI).

The uncertainty that Vivian experienced motivated her to seek peer support: 'We kind of shared each other's feedback, we read the works posted on Moodle, the examples, and tried to see if we were in the right direction' (SRI). Her strategies to address this issue, therefore, involved working collaboratively with peers (sharing feedback and reading exemplars) to gain a broader understanding of how tutors were providing feedback.

Feedback content was also perceived as an issue when it was believed to lack specificity or a clear link to the student's work:

The essay is written very well. Okay, that's positive, but how well is very well ... I got 'shows originality' as a comment and I like it, but what part showed originality? (Tom, SRI).

Tom suggested a strategy he had used with former undergraduate tutors to ensure he received specific comments which facilitated the revision of his work:

... hand a hard copy in and get the hard copy back and then you look through it and you can see comments that have been made within the contents of your work ... there were some referencing errors, then I could see the particular referencing errors (Tom, SRI).

Issues also arose for students when they perceived a lack of consistency between formative and summative feedback: 'feedback on one draft copy and the final feedback kind of didn't match up' (Tom, SRI). Similarly, Vivian felt that some of the improvement areas highlighted in her summative feedback could have been indicated in the feedback on her draft: 'reading especially the areas for improvement definitely got me thinking that if there was more guidance on the draft, then these things would be covered' (Vivian, SRI).

In classes taught by multiple tutors the students experienced some tensions when they noted their tutors appeared to differ in the standards of work that they expected. Lucy believed that her tutor communicated lower expectations in her feedback than the other tutor from the course, who appeared to her to be more thorough and rigorous:

My feedback was from Janet and some of my classmates' were from X [a non participating tutor]... his feedback was more detailed or more direct, and ... strict, it's like he got higher levels or higher criterions, because in this part me and one of my classmates just wrote three interpretations of this ambiguous sentence and Janet said mine was OK ... but my classmate got more suggestions from X (Lucy, SRI).

They experienced a similar situation in another class, one of the tutors focusing more on content whereas the other was more concerned about structure and mechanics. To gain a more rounded understanding of the issues they had to address in their revision, Lucy and her classmates shared the feedback received and discussed it online: 'we chatted online and, when we got feedback, we just copied the feedback to the group talk and we all can see and we can discuss' (SRI).

One of the issues widely shared by the students concerned timing. Amy, for example, claimed that feedback on her draft was sent too close to the deadline for the final assignment: 'I got the feedback on the draft quite late, like one and a half, maybe two [weeks], before the final submission' (SRI). This issue was also raised by Julie, who, as a strategy, decided to continue working on her assignment while she awaited her tutor's comments: 'we should proceed with the assignment and do not wait for the feedback ... then, when I receive feedback, I can fix the part that I need to change' (SRI). Vivian shared the same issue and strategy, but was concerned she may be wasting her time if her tutor did not agree with the direction she took:

You can keep working on the paper while you are waiting for feedback but then you get feedback saying you are not on the right track ... you should change a lot of things, then it's a waste (Vivian, SRI).

A different type of timing issue was raised by Carrie, who felt frustration and annoyance when she started a new semester without having received feedback on her classes from the previous semester:

Troy's [feedback] was a week late ... which is always frustrating. I mean in the end is one week but ... I wanted to have it so I could start the new semester leaving the other things behind. That's probably why it annoys me (Carrie, SRI).

A further issue perceived by most students was the sense of uncertainty they felt when they received gradeless summative feedback, which they believed had a negative emotional impact. Lucy stated that 'there was like one or two weeks between the final feedback and the mark and it's a really difficult period' and added that '[a classmate] panicked for two days before she got the mark' (SRI). Julie expressed similar feelings, Tom argued that feedback 'doesn't mean a great deal without an actual grade' (SRI), and Rose said: 'I have never received feedback on something without the mark ... it's what I am used to', thus suggesting that issues may arise when expectations generated from prior feedback experiences are not met. If not the exact grade, they thought that the feedback should indicate the grade band: 'it doesn't have to be that bang on percent ... it could be fifty to sixty, that kind of rough idea of what area you are in' (Tom, SRI).

The importance of this issue was, in turn, heightened by what they saw as the inconsistencies between tutors' feedback styles, such as when tutors teaching the same class were not congruous regarding the information they disclosed to students:

When X gives students feedback, X says something like 'well done' or 'congratulations'. We had nothing like that and we were really... we don't have 'congratulations', maybe we didn't pass! (Lucy, SRI).

To relieve the anxiety they felt when they received gradeless feedback and perceived inconsistency in tutor feedback styles, the students adopted a range of strategies. Lucy sought peer support and, with her study group, compared the group's summative feedback comments to predict their outcomes: 'we put the feedback together ... we wanted to check if there is anything indicating that we didn't pass so we can prepare the re-submission' (Lucy, SRI). Rose, on the other hand, adopted a more individualistic approach of trying to compare positive and negative comments for equivalent strength:

When I first read it I was confused by the content analysis and the strengths and ... areas for improvement ... I was trying to weigh them against each other ... does this outweigh this? ... based on this I had no idea what kind of mark I was going to get (Rose, SRI).

The students appeared to understand the pedagogical value of not disclosing the grades: 'the grade is not as important as the process of the work' (Julie, SRI); 'I guess you can reflect on how your essay was written and how it can be improved ... they want you to concentrate more on your strengths and areas for improvement' (Rose, SRI). However, they argued against the effectiveness of this technique: 'I wasn't reading thinking how I can make my next essay better based on this; I was thinking what my mark was' (Rose, SRI).

Tutors

For tutors, one key issue was what they perceived as inconsistencies in students' linguistic competence, which, they argued, led to difficulties with assessing students' work.

Sometimes you don't have a clue whether they've understood the content or not because you can't get through the problem that is their language. So you spend a lot of time saying 'what do you mean here?' ... 'Do you mean...?' and trying to get clarification on what they're trying to say (Janet, BI).

Similarly, Claire stated that students' language problems 'detract from our [tutors'] ability to engage with the more substantive content' (BI). Janet responded to these difficulties by providing extensive feedback ('you have to give them a lot of feedback ... to show them where we don't understand what they are saying', BI) and adopting a number of other language-related strategies:

We can't provide feedback on their language in detail ... but we can tell them they need help and direct them to proof readers and English language classes ... I can tell them that I don't understand and that there are unacceptable errors that need sorting out ... I'm prepared to offer advice on organisation and structure and content, and tell them there are issues with their language, but not point them all out. Sometimes, if it's a simple grammatical error, I will just correct it in red or on track changes (Janet, BI).

In addressing this issue Janet suggested strategies which supported students both within the context of a class ('offer advice on organisation and structure') and externally ('direct them to proof readers and English language classes').

A further issue arose when tutors believed that students' limitations with their linguistic competence had affected their understanding of tutor feedback and, therefore, the impact of tutor feedback on student learning. Janet claimed that students 'may not have the language for our feedback to help them at all' (BI), while Claire argued that 'that [use and understanding of English] is probably where they're being held back' (SRI). To tackle this issue, Claire modified her writing style to make her feedback more accessible to students:

I really try to use short, clear sentences. My natural way of writing is not that; my natural academic way of writing has various sub-paragraphs, brackets, sub-brackets, and everything like that ... so I'm purposely clearer in how I give feedback to all my students, especially to those students who are overseas and working with English as their second language (Claire, SRI).

Janet, on the other hand, did not alter her language use ('I don't have time to tailor my language to their level of English', SRI; 'I don't make it into very simple language', BI); instead, she suggested students should seek help from her ('I write what I need to write and, if they don't understand it, they can ask me', BI) or externally ('for the students whose language is weaker, we tell them in the draft to go and get help with a one-to-one tutor', SRI). However, she later qualified the earlier statements she had made and indicated that she made some adaptations to her writing: 'maybe I just

avoid complexity ... I would perhaps mostly try and avoid language that was challenging' (BI).

Tutors indicated that students' difficulties in understanding tutor feedback appeared to be grounded not only in their linguistic competence but also in the subjectivity inherent in the assessment criteria. Daniel explained this issue:

You get the academics together to discuss them [assessment criteria] because they have slightly ... or very different interpretations. So why do we expect the students to be able to first understand what they actually mean? ... another thing, there's no weight in the criteria, but we [academics] all know that content or analysis are more important than some of the other elements because they encapsulate a lot of things (Daniel, BI).

Daniel also argued that interpreting assessment criteria required feedback experience ('you understand that when you get feedback from different people') as well as 'background knowledge of what's very good within that area', attributes which he believed students lacked at that stage ('they cannot understand precisely because they don't have that background') (BI). To enhance students' understanding of feedback, Daniel suggested citing, in tutor feedback, 'examples' and 'quotations' from their work (BI).

Furthermore, tutors recognised that difficulties in communicating feedback effectively could be caused by the tutors' use of language which they believed the students perceived as vague or confusing. This is an experience that Troy had had as a Master's student himself and yet found himself doing as a tutor:

[as a student] sometimes I found it confusing when people were saying ... words like 'analysis' or 'synthesis' or 'there's not enough critical commentary' ... I used to find these things vague and unhelpful ... it's really funny because when I write this kind of stuff and my students come and ask me 'what do you mean by that...?', sometimes you find it hard to describe (Troy, BI).

Like Daniel, Troy believed that an awareness of key words in feedback was developed gradually through experience: 'the more you read about what it is to be critical and all this, then a lot of these comments really do start appearing more and more substantial' (Troy, BI). To assist students in understanding tutor language, Troy adopted a range of strategies which included: giving 'a five, ten-minute presentation' to the entire class on key words (BI), consistently repeating 'words from the band descriptors', avoiding 'phrases that are obscure or generic ... [such as] "this is not

very critical", and providing 'a particular example' from the student's work (SRI).

Another issue perceived by tutors was generated by students' expectations for spoon-feeding instruction:

[It] annoys me when they [students] will ask questions before they've even gone out there to try to find out about it ... I think they want to be spoon-fed and they're getting spoon-fed but perhaps not as big a spoon as they'd like ... Autonomy is a big buzz-word for ages in education and yet it appears that students are becoming less and less autonomous (Janet, BI).

To promote independent learning, Janet and her colleague discussed the importance of autonomy with the students ('we talk about autonomy in all sorts of ways') and encouraged them to regulate their learning more effectively ('get started on it and ask some intelligent questions when you've done some reading') (BI). Troy, however, expressed the view that students and tutors differed in their beliefs about the function of feedback: He suggested that tutors thought academic feedback should 'give pointers to knowledge seekers ... help students learn how to think about problems', while students expected feedback 'to provide answers to an already given set of problems' (Troy, BI). He further illustrated his point:

There's nothing that drives students more crazy than to say to them 'I want you to be more critical' and, instead, they say 'please, no, I don't want that, I want you to tell me what you want me to write in order to get a good mark (Troy, BI).

Troy thought that this tension was rooted in students' expectations that universities should replicate the models they knew from their previous education:

They very often see their knowledge now as a kind of process of us telling them what they have to do in order to pass, which was probably the model they had experienced in their previous education from primary to high school (Troy, BI).

Troy also felt uncomfortable with trends in higher education, as he saw them, that positioned students as customers obtaining a service. He argued that academics 'are more and more pressurised from the university down and from the students up' and that 'feedback has become a battleground', with students 'demanding more and more very guided feedback' and the university 'requiring tutors keep the customers happy while they maintain academic standards' (BI). Troy believed that 'even if you wrote them feedback that was five pages, it would still not be enough' and felt that

'students demand from us to give them the ultimate key to unlock the high marks' (SRI). He claimed that 'feedback [should] be usefully used for improvement, not hunting the ever elusive high mark' (SRI).

An issue which featured very prominently in the data from tutors was tutors' lack of time. They all thought that their workload allocation for marking and providing feedback was unrealistic:

It takes me much longer to mark an assignment than the university could afford to pay ... I keep saying I'm going to spend less time because I've got to, and then I never manage it (Janet, SRI).

I probably spend far too much time marking. There's hours of it ... the hours allocation just doesn't work at all (Claire, SRI).

In addition, they argued that their workload model was not equitable since it 'doesn't take into consideration how many students you have in the [class]' (Daniel, SRI). Therefore, tutors teaching large classes were affected more adversely: 'if you have a lot of students, you can see why you can struggle to do everything in a couple of weeks' (Daniel, SRI). Troy agreed with Daniel and explained why tutors could not provide extensive feedback on students' work:

There's a cost benefit analysis that you have to perform, either you have to do it by the deadline and deliver the marks or you can spend your time on the feedback but then the marks will not be ready (Troy, SRI).

Tutors claimed that a more adequate allocation of time would have a substantial impact on their feedback and satisfaction level. Janet, for example, would 'talk through the feedback with the students ... and check they understand it' (SRI). Claire coincidentally suggested the same procedure and added creating a 'seminar forum with much smaller groups opening up a discussion' (BI). Sufficient time allocation would, tutors believed, facilitate a more dialogic type of feedback and help close the feedback loop.

A final issue which tutors highlighted concerned tutor motivation and physical integrity. They mentioned that the large amount of marking and the time constraints to assess students' work had a negative impact on tutors' physical and psychological wellbeing. Claire, for instance, argued that she sometimes experienced 'marking fatigue' and added: 'you're marking the same assignment over and over in a short

period of time, you get bored and disillusioned with it, so that's a reality however much we try not to' (SRI).

Discussion

The issues identified in this study by the participants are not unusual. A number of studies which have identified students having difficulty with understanding academic terminology, for example, are listed by Johnsson (2013). Suggestions for addressing such issues include the use of model texts (Huxham 2007) and engagement in dialogue (Rae and Cochrane 2008), the latter a strategy adopted by student Julie in this study. The commonly reported situation in this case was reversed, with the student as postgraduate disciplinary specialist engaging with a generic 'research skills' tutor, thus neatly illustrating the dialogic nature of the process.

A lack of clarity with regard to pedagogical aim, such as confusion between formative and summative intent, is also something which has been reported in the literature. Tian and Lowe (2012), for instance, describe how in their study continued dialogue and time facilitated resolution of the issue. These and the other issues that in the present study focused on the 'object' of feedback (Price et al. 2013, 4), such as timing, might seem to suggest that students lacked agency, seeking an authoritative voice for validation.

However, it can be argued that, on the contrary, the students were displaying precisely the kind of agency that feedback is intended to encourage, as they engaged in a wide range of strategies to address the concerns that were raised. Tom, for example, in submitting a hard copy of his assignments, drew on a previous positive experience that enabled him to obtain the detailed feedback that he sought. Vivian and Lucy participated in peer networks to discuss the feedback they had received, not only so that they might 'compare notes', but also so that they might develop their understanding in preparation for revising their work. Julie and Vivian both commenced the revisions to their assignments prior to receiving feedback on their drafts. While they may not have been comfortable with this situation, they made a decision to draw on their own resources in evaluating their work, a clear step towards autonomy and self-reliance (Nicol 2013).

Thus, through their responses the students indicated that they were demonstrating agency: formulating their individual choice of actions that would move them towards a greater level of understanding and capacity to appraise their own work (Sadler, 2010). While they were perhaps not yet fully acculturated into the norms of their institution and discipline, they had successfully implemented strategies that would ease the process. Where they remained frustrated and unable to offer a

strategy for amelioration of an issue appeared to be most evident in those issues over which they had no means of control, for example, with regard to policies on ungraded feedback and lack of any feedback within a suitable timeframe.

Almost all the staff participants, too, while noting a number of issues that have commonly been observed in previous studies such as difficulty understanding students' writing and a sense that students would not use the feedback in a productive way (e.g. Johnsson 2012; Jones and Gorra 2013), attempted to engage in a process of productive dialogue. For instance, Claire adapted her 'natural' written language style to make it more accessible, and Daniel and Troy incorporated examples and specific quotations into their feedback. There was also evidence that tutors had reflected on feedback from a student perspective, for example, in Daniel's observations about the opaqueness of the assignment criteria. The issues about which the tutors appeared less inclined to propose solutions were those that were external to their academic work and outside their control, such as the lack of time available to provide feedback. In short, the tutors seemed to be aware of social constructivist approaches to feedback and to believe that they engaged in what might be termed within that paradigm 'good practice'.

Holliday (2005: 85) has expressed the view that autonomy in education has been widely misunderstood. He argues that students are already autonomous and capable of exercising agency, that autonomy is a way of being in the world rather than a learnt behaviour, something that is discovered rather than created. The students and staff in this study appear to support this position, coming up, as they did, with a range of ways in which the issues they experienced could be ameliorated if not fully addressed.

Conclusion

The study reported in this paper identified a range of issues that could be referred to as sources of some kind of dissatisfaction for the student and staff participants in the study. The issues themselves, on the whole, reflected and reinforced findings from previous studies that indicate that mutual misunderstanding is commonplace. However, there is also evidence that both staff and students seek out imaginative solutions to the difficulties they experience, so long as they are within their purview of control. Indeed, for the student participants in the study reported in this paper, difficult issues appeared to act as drivers for self-directed activity, indicating that agency and ultimately learning are less likely to flourish through the provision of 'answers' from expert staff than from experiential, self-motivated action. In this, the implications of the study for the courses involved and for further research are extensive. Not only

does the practice of tutor feedback require a practical level of re-consideration, given the themes that related to the 'object' of feedback, but the potentially agency-inhibiting system of teacher feedback needs to be further explored on a larger scale.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the *Higher Education Academy* under the Individual Teaching Development Grant number GENTDG165.

References

- Askew, S., and C. Lodge. 2000. "Gifts, Ping Pongs and Loops: Linking Feedback and Learning." In *Feedback for Learning*, edited by S. Askew, 1-17. London: Routledge.
- Bailey, R., and M. Garner. 2010. "Is the Feedback in Higher Education Assessment Worth the Paper it is Written on? Teachers' Reflections on their Practices." *Teaching in Higher Education* 15 (2): 187–198.
- Bols, A., and K. Wicklow. 2013. "Feedback – What Students Want." In *Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education*, edited by S. Merry, M. Price, D. Carless, and M. Taras, 19-29. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Borg, S. 2006. *Teacher Cognition and Language Education: Research and Practice*. Continuum: London.
- Borg, S. 2011. "The impact of in-service teacher education on language teachers' beliefs." *System* 39 (3): 370-80.
- Boud, D., and N. Falchikov. 2006. "Aligning Assessment with Long-term Learning." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 31 (4): 399-413.
- Boud, D., and E. Molloy, eds. 2013. *Feedback in Higher and Professional Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Brown, S., and P. Knight. 1994. *Assessing Learners in Higher Education*. London: Kogan Page.
- Bryan, C., and K. Clegg, eds. 2006. *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education*. London: Routledge.
- Burke, D., and J. Pieterick. 2010. *Giving Students Effective Written Feedback*. McGraw Hill: Open University Press.
- Dumont, H., D. Istance, and F. Benavides, eds. 2010. *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice*. OECD Publications.
- Gibbs, G., and C. Simpson. 2004. "Conditions under which Assessment Supports Students' Learning." *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* 1: 3-31.
- Holliday, A. 2005. *The Struggle to Teach English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Huxham, M. 2007. "Fast and Effective Feedback: Are Model Answers the Answer?" *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 32 (6): 601–11.
- Johnsson, A. 2013. "Facilitating Productive Use of Feedback in Higher Education." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 14 (1): 63-76.
- Jones, O., and A. Gorra. 2013. "Assessment Feedback Only on Demand: Supporting the Few not Supplying the Many." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 14 (2): 149-161.
- Lindgren, R., and R. McDaniel. 2011. "Transforming Online Learning through Narrative and Student Agency." *Educational Technology and Society* 15 (4): 344-355.
- Liu, N., and D. Carless. 2006. "Peer Feedback: The Learning Element of Peer Assessment." *Teaching in Higher Education* 11 (3): 279-290.

- Lyle, J. 2003. "Stimulated Recall: A Report on its Use in Naturalistic Research." *British Educational Research Journal* 29 (6): 861-878.
- Martin, J. 2010. "Self Regulated Learning, Social Cognitive Theory, and Agency." *Educational Psychologist* 39 (2): 135-145.
- Merry, S., M. Price, D. Carless, and M. Taras, eds. 2013. *Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Molloy, E., and D. Boud. 2012. "Changing Conceptions of Feedback." In *Feedback in Higher and Professional Education*, edited by D. Boud and E. Molloy, 11-33. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Nicol, D. 2010. "From Monologue to Dialogue: Improving Written Feedback Processes in Mass Higher Education." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35 (5): 501-517.
- Nicol, D., A. Thomson, and C. Breslin. 2014. "Rethinking Feedback Practices in Higher Education: A Peer Review Perspective." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 39 (1): 102-122.
- Orsmond, P., S. Merry, and K. Handley, K. 2012. "Students' Social Learning Practice as a Way of Learning from Tutor Feedback." In *Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education*, edited by S. Merry, M. Price, D. Carless, and M. Taras, 123-132. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Pokorny, H., and P. Pickford. 2010. "Complexity, Cues and Relationships: Student Perceptions of Feedback." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 11 (1): 23-30.
- Price, M., K. Handley, J. Millar, and B. O'Donovan. 2010. "Feedback: All that Effort, but what is the Effect?" *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35 (3): 277-289.
- Price, M., K. Handley, B. O'Donovan, C. Rust, and J. Millar. 2012. "Assessment Feedback: An Agenda for Change." In *Reconceptualising Feedback in Higher Education*, edited by S. Merry, M. Price, D. Carless, and M. Taras, 41-53. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Rae, A., and D. Cochrane. 2008. "Listening to Students: How to Make Written Assessment Feedback Useful." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 9 (3): 217-230.
- Robinson, S., D. Pope, and L. Holyoak. 2013. "Can we Meet their Expectations? Experiences and Perceptions of Feedback in First Year Undergraduate Students." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 38 (3): 260-272.
- Sadler, D. R. 2010. "Beyond feedback: developing student capability in complex appraisal." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35 (5): 535-550.
- Tian, M., and J. Lowe. 2013. "The Role of Feedback in Cross-cultural Learning: A Case Study of Chinese Taught Postgraduate Students in a UK University." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 38 (5): 580-598.
- Wingate, U. (2010). "The Impact of Formative Feedback on the Development of Academic Writing." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35 (5): 519-533.